Not a Word of a Lie: The Story of One Woman's Life, Written on a Bedsheet

Translated from Italian by Seán McDonagh and Georgia Wall

Excerpts from

Gnanca na busia

By Clelia Marchi (1912–2006)

The bed sheet by Clelia Marchi is collected at the Archivio diaristico nazionale of Pieve Santo Stefano (AR).

The transcription of the text is curated by Rosanna Mai and the Archivio diaristico nazionale.

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*D*ear Persons Make Of This A Treasure Of This Bed Sheet 'Cause There is A Piece of My Life; there is My Husband; I Clelia Marchi, (72) years of age, have writ-ten the story of my land and my people, I've filled a bedsheet with my words: there's the farm work, there's my loved ones, the threads, the kittchin, my loved ones, our celebrations: I have writ-ten an entyre story; an adventure, in these sacrifices, in the everyday suffering, every line unwynd-ing along a thread of honesty: just like the title of my bedsheet book: 'Not a Word of a Lie' have I told: Gnanca nà busia, not fore myself; or to my readers!!!

Our life. I remember as a young girl there were lots of us children: my mamma worked hard to send us to school, I went to school but only in the winter; because my mamma had to go and work elsewhere, I had to take cair of my littel brothers and sisters, but we did'nt have any toys: not one! we used to play with stones, the earth, make littel dishes, littel tables, littel balls etc. etc… I used to teach my brothers and sisters a bit, the younger ones, how to do there home-work; but I had littel to teach them; because I did'nt often go to school myself, only in the winter: in my clogs, and a patchwork pinny in two colours made out of my mamma's petticoat; and a pair of my papà's old trousers; I looked like Arlecchino!; when we got home from school we did'nt go and play: we made socks or crib shoes for the babies; or lace: my mamma'd give me a big pile of hemp, and so, you worked from when you were a child—

[…]

If folk only knew how hard we worked back then, carry-ing out

chard by the cartful: the same cart that was for the manyure from the cattel shed. and in that mud barefoot: be-cause our landlord said that if the tredding of the soil was left to the cattel then next year he would reap less. O the things we had to do all the sacrifises and the strugguls would need a whole bedsheet, as wyde as the sea: to tell you all our toils and sorrows—

[…]

one day our son got sick and had to go to the hospital in venice: for .18. months: us two working more so we'd be working more to help that son of ours: and who knows if he'd be able to work again: cause that year seemed to us like the year of desperation, first our son in hospital then the cheese was spoild in the dairy, no-body was buying the watermelons; because the landowner wanted more than what the buyers they wanted to give him… so the first batch of them rottid in the fields, desperate we were: that was the same year of the mas-sive storm, or hail-storm; and then what happened! What happened was something much more important than this dissaster: our son who had to be operated on on his kidney: nothing compares to fearing for your child's life! And then too much work; me and my ~~son~~ husband working all the same; needless to say it was one thing after another and not just with work!

[…]

Ive always thought that someone would ask me some-thing about my past, about my marriage, but it has never been possible for me, because back then if a woman was seen talking with any-one she would have criticism that she'd never hear the end of; plus back

then it was the husband who was in charge, he was the head of the family: and what the husband said went for everyone; women took care of the children and that was that: and this is why women never took a step forward: it was like that for all women: work, eat, and then too bed: and so theyve never been able to express their ideas… they settled for very littel…

[…]

Who knows what you think of my write-ings; but I wrote them for me, I'm not wanting to offend anyone, I wrote them as my heart always told me in real life: I know that there's only terrible things in these write-ings; just thinking about it there's not a reason in the world to even write about it all!; but who can say what my heart tells me, that bye God, they are God's own truth, that these write-ings are things I have lived through too do'nt you forget: there's always some-thing that you have'nt done in life; whoever reads this book I think it's not something to be forgotten like you would a pair of old shoes thrown in the rubish bins whoever reads these words can understand what life was like for certain people; that it was harde for me, an my husband; maybe because I'm talking about .50. years back: it's never needed to be said today things are'nt bad; tough things used to happen to you; so years after years more than .50. passed by, just like that drop by drop they arrived up until this point; of course you have to react, so you don't make yourself ill, or get stuck in the sadness: we do'nt really know; how a person should behave youll always find some-one against what you do; so, do as your heart tells you

If you want something done, do it yourself: with some people, it's best to just turn your back: it's not worth suffering for those who don't love you, when you do your duty: when the worst happenes, who's there for you, I know who; without anyone telling me twice: if your always watch-ing others you would'nt even go to get the bread, life goes on and no-thing can erase what we've been through

[…]

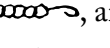
Night is the time of lonely-ness: the moment of truth: it is the moment: or the time for memorys: if you've no sorow of your own it's no use you trying to understand: but who in this world has no sorow? more so than before, with all the acsidents there are: almost more people die. it seems of acsidents than illness. There's so much to be said here that, as always, we need to go back;

the poverty there was back then: poor like you wouldn't believe, short on everything: barely any bread, barely a change of clothes, we lived on polenta, we washed with lye, made from ashes: from burnt firewood; you put the ashes in the copper polenta pot with water brought to the boil; that was the lye for your day-to-day wash. For laundrie and linen it was different… And we lived on top of each other, so cramped that there were lice too, for beds we had mattresses on the floor stuffed with husks, with the dryed corn leaves, there was only a singel room in the house; the beds, table, chairs and hearth: littel or no furniture: the cupboard: the board for knede-ing dough: but next to nothing we had really, it was like that for all the poor back then, we thought we had it good: that was all there was!

[…]

Behind the house there was the toilet which was a hole in the ground: everyone's rooms were small, with low ceilings and the windows were like those in the chicken coop: and because everything was so cramped, you'd get fleas hopping on the floor; we were always douse-ing the floor, with tar oil and lye soap; then there were the lice that did the rounds with everyone: that's how it was with lice, if you didn't have them you got them anyway because everyone near you did, and some folk had to cut their hair, and the girls'd cry because they'd get teased for their shorn heads, and what we did was to dab a bit of petrol and tye a scarf round their heads; it was like that for everyone, more or less, it's not even worth write-ing about—

[…]

In the past, just before Easter, that was when you did your proper clean even up the chimny: that was difficult to do other times of the year: you took down your trammel hook: the one with chains like this  , and you tyed it to a metal wyre and you'd get the children to drag it round the dusty streets, every so often they'd dip it in water and it'd come up shine-ing like new: for them too it was like having a toy, meanwhyle the mothers cleaned all the copper: they brought out all the copper they had: then with vinegar, salt, cornflour, stirring it all: the picklin, we called that: that was how you cleaned copper, then you dryed it and it was as good as new: we cleaned the hearth too with a red stone; but we had littel copper to clean: we cleaned the mens' shears the ones for the vines: the sickle: the falson as we called it: then we hung them all up on

the wall: and we looked at them like they were precious things: and they were precious things: because they were for our work; and we loved them.

TRANSLATORS' NOTE

Clelia Marchi was born in 1912 and raised in abject poverty in rural Northern Italy. She wrote her life story on a bedsheet in 1984, following her husband's sudden death.

Reading the Italian text(ile), Clelia Marchi's idiosyncratic but effective spelling and punctuation bespeak the ingenuousness of a woman who only had sporadic access to primary-level education. We debated the ethics of correcting the orthographic errors present in the original text: Marchi's explicit desire to be read and, crucially, understood meant that we wanted to give her the same editorial attention as any other writer. At the same time, we believed that the originality of this text, and perhaps the power of it, lies in its open and unedited quality. This contrast with the polish of edited texts could be seen to accentuate the moments of poetic beauty, profound emotion and wisdom in Clelia's story. For us, Clelia's raw expressiveness, from the emotional intensity of her words to her unique use of punctuation, is a defining feature of the text, and we believe they serve to amplify her reflections on universal themes such as fertility, loss, value, and labour.

In our translation we have sought to retain the oral quality of Clelia's writing by re-creating errors that give a sense of a disadvantaged but determined writer, without inhibiting the reader's comprehension. Where possible, we have mis-spelled the same words Clelia has: *care* in standard Italian is *curare*; Clelia's alternative but phonetically rational spelling of *qurare* is replicated here as *cair*, following the logical application of primary-level phonics. We have tried to give an idea of her over-use of emphatic accents which aren't found in English (e.g. *ò* for *ho*) by omission or misplacement of the contractive apostrophe (e.g. *would'nt* rather than *wouldn't*) and additional hyphens (e.g. *some-thing*).

Marchi's choice to re-purpose the linen she had, half a century prior, embroidered for her trousseau is a feminist act: a beautiful, tangible allusion to the fact that, for many women, domestic labour, though burdensome and mundane, can also serve as a means – perhaps the only means – of expressing creativity and a sense of self. And if Marchi's spelling and grammar imply ingenuousness, the bedsheet filled with undulating rows of loops of ink feels symbolic of her quiet ingenuity. The decision to write on the sheet, Marchi explained, was inspired by an ancient civilization she remembered learning about at school and their practice of wrapping the dead in cloth. As she put it: 'Because I could no longer lie with my husband in them, I filled them with my words.'

ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Seán McDonagh is a Milan-based literary translator and editor who translates from Italian to English. He was the National Centre for Writing 2024 Emerging Translator Mentee for Italian and he is a former member of the Emerging Translators Network committee. His work has been published in *MAYDAY Magazine*, *Literary Hub*, *Exchanges: Journal of Literary Translation*, *Asymptote*, the *Southern Review* and the *Morocco Bound Review*.
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Georgia Wall lives in Birmingham, where she works as a translator and creative workshop facilitator. Since 2022, she has also been employed as the part-time publishing manager of The Emma Press. She has a PhD in Italian Studies from the University of Warwick. Her first full-length translation, *Struck* by Susanna Bissoli, was published in July 2025 by Linden Editions.